

BY
H.S.
Agel

CHRISTMAS

every

CHRISTMAS

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INTRODUCTION

For St. Francis of Assisi, Christmas was eminently the feast of feasts. At one time he hoped to get a law passed ordering householders to provide cattle and birds with choice rations on Christmas so that they might share the joy of Christ's birthday. History does not record any particular success for this proposal, but St. Francis' popularization of the Christmas crib was an immediate and lasting triumph. There may have been other representations of the Nativity scene before the Poverello set up his crèche at Greccio, but he is generally credited with establishing the custom.

It was the Christmas of 1223, one of the last Francis was to spend on this earth. The saint felt the need of commemorating the Christ Child's birth in some special way to stir up the fire of love in the cave-cold hearts of men. "I want to celebrate the memory of the Child who was born in Bethlehem and see with my bodily eyes, as best I can, how He suffered the lack of all those things needed by an infant; how He was 'laid in a manger' and how He rested on the straw, with the ox and the ass standing by" (Thomas of Celano). The properties were not hard to come by: a manger, a bit of straw, a live ox, and an ass. A friend, John Velita, was happy to provide them.

On Christmas Eve the country folk of Greccio trudged up the mountain to the chapel where Francis' crib was set up. We can easily imagine the exultation that thrilled in Francis as he watched the torches flickering through the trees and heard the peasants' Christmas songs echoing in the clear night air.

St. Francis was the deacon for the Midnight Mass; in his

humility he had never considered himself worthy to be ordained a priest. He chanted the Christmas Gospel and afterward preached the sermon. So filled was he with love for the Babe of Bethlehem that each time he pronounced the name of Jesus he seemed to lick his lips with his tongue — as though the very name of the Saviour had a physical sweetness for him.

The gifts of the Omnipotent Lord were multiplied there, and a marvelous vision was seen by a certain virtuous man. He saw an infant lying in a manger, as if lifeless; the Saint of God came up to the child and awakened it, as though from a deep sleep. That vision was not inappropriate, since the Child Jesus was forgotten in the hearts of many, but He was awakened there by the working of His grace through His servant, Saint Francis, and was impressed on their memories in an unforgettable way (Thomas of Celano).

This special love for Christmas and the Christ Child St. Francis left intact to his followers. In *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* is a charming story of how St. Clare of Assisi was once so ill that she could not go to chapel with the other Sisters to chant the Divine Office on Christmas Eve. Naturally, she felt this loss keenly. "But Jesus Christ, her Spouse, unwilling to leave her comfortless, carried her miraculously to the church of St. Francis, so that she was present at Matins, assisted at the Midnight Mass, and received the Holy Communion, after which she was carried back to bed."

Most statues of St. Anthony of Padua represent him holding a smiling Child Jesus in his arms because at least one witness so reported the Saviour appearing to the saint. A similar apparition is recorded in the life of St. Bonaventure.

The Church makes a special effort to prepare us for Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation, by four weeks of Advent,

just as she bids us ready ourselves for Easter by six weeks of Lent. In the feasts that immediately follow Christmas and form part of its octave, the Church surrounds the birth of the Saviour with a monstrance of martyrs that presage the crucified Christ, the sign of contradiction.

In recent years there have been sincere efforts to renew the spirit of Christmas in Christian souls. Many families and churches, for example, have revived the old Austrian tradition of the Advent wreath. This wreath consists of four candles mounted within a wreath or in a yule log appropriately decorated with evergreen and ribbon. One candle is lighted on the first Sunday of Advent and another on each succeeding Sunday. If the custom is carried out in the home, the head of the household may precede the lighting of the candle by the reading of the Sunday Gospel. The entire family may join in the conclusion of this simple ceremony by singing a Christmas hymn. The revival of such customs are all to the good; they are excellent means of giving external form to the inner spiritual preparation we should be making for Christmas.

The purpose of this book, however, is to go a step farther, to give depth and substance to our appreciation of Christmas, to make this great feast as meaningful for us in our modern world as it was for St. Francis in his medieval world, to try to recapture some of the zest with which the Poverello and his first followers looked forward to Christmas, to help re-create the fervor that possessed the simple folk who climbed a mountain by torchlight to celebrate an unforgettable Christmas at Greccio.

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PART ONE: ADVENT



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

NOT WITH A BANG

Isn't the Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent a rather strange choice for launching the Christmas season? It's all about such distinctly uncheerful items as the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the world, and the last judgment.

The first Sunday of Advent also happens to be the beginning of the liturgical year, it is the New Year's Day of the Church calendar. On either score, are we not ill-prepared for the terrifying prophecy that is served up cold for our edification at Sunday Mass?

"And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations bewildered by the roaring of sea and waves; men fainting for fear and for expectation of the things that are coming on the world; for the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming upon a cloud with great power and majesty. But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand."

And he spoke to them a parable. "Behold the fig tree, and all the trees. When they now put forth their buds, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things coming to pass, know that the kingdom of God is near. Amen I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all things have been accomplished. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."*

Two distinct events are being foretold here: the ruin of Jerusalem and the breakup of our universe. The question inevitably springs to mind: Why these dire predictions of woe just when we are doing our Christmas shopping and sending season's greetings and making plans for the holidays? Why all this unpleasantness just now on the threshold of the gayest time of the year?

First of all, let's try to untangle the prophecies and determine which words pertain to which event. Fr. Stephen J. Hartdegen** explains the Gospel this way:

* All quotations from the New Testament are from the Confraternity Edition (1941), published by St. Anthony's Guild, Paterson, N. J.

** *A Chronological Harmony of the Gospels*, copyright 1942 and 1945, St. Anthony's Guild Paterson, N. J., footnotes on pp. 154 and 155.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the various signs preceding it were to be a type of the final cataclysm at the end of the world. In the style of the Old Testament prophets, events of the near and distant future are telescoped almost inseparably into one discourse by our Lord.

The signs preceding the destruction of Jerusalem were to be no less infallible than the leaves of the fig tree are as an indication of summer. Moreover, even people of that generation would witness the reality of the Master's prophecy. That is why, when it was at hand, the Christians of Jerusalem fled to safety in the country of the Transjordan.

Working backward, we understand the second half of the Gospel as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem. The prophecy was fulfilled when the Roman legions invaded the city in A.D. 70. They battered the Temple to the ground so that literally not a stone was left upon a stone — precisely as Christ had foretold. St. Matthew, in recording this same prophecy, uses the fearful words "abomination of desolation." St. Luke thought this a reference to the Roman army which besieged and fired the Holy City.

The first half of the Gospel concerns the end of the world. Certain signs, not all of them mentioned in this passage, will precede the last day. For example, Christianity will have been preached over the whole earth. That is not to say everybody will be converted, of course, but the Gospel will be carried to the limits of the globe. The end of the world will not necessarily follow immediately on the fulfillment of this prophecy; it may come years, even centuries, later.

There will also be a great apostasy, people falling away from the Church to follow the antichrist. The antichrist will seduce many by passing himself off as God; by the help of the devil, he will work sensational prodigies and accomplish extraordinary feats. The prophets Elias and

Henoch will return and fight against this imposter. The Jews will be converted and it seems their conversion will be effected through the preaching of Elias. Finally, there will be wonders in the heavens and on earth. The sun will be obscured, the moon will not give her light, the stars will fall from the heavens, the powers of heaven will be moved.

Whenever we talk about the end of the world, we naturally want to know if it is imminent. Throughout history, there have been those who felt the end was not far off. St. Paul and his contemporaries were convinced the world would end during their lifetimes or shortly thereafter. The invention of gunpowder caused many wise men to think the day of judgment was just around the next turn in the road. The genuine horrors of World War I seemed in many ways to fulfill the requirements of doom. Yet somehow we managed to survive a second World War far worse than the first and there have been big and little wars going on almost continuously ever since. We have come to live side by side with atom bombs and hydrogen bombs and NIKE batteries and ICBM's and the possibilities are so terrifying that the imagination goes numb if we dare to think about them.

Is the end of the world coming soon? We don't know. It does not seem as though the prophecies have been accomplished yet. Actually, it should not make an atom of difference. We all must die sooner or later and the worst thing that can happen at the end of the world is that we die in the state of sin. And that can happen to any of us at any time. So we must not be too preoccupied about the end of the world or worry about it. We should see it as part of the divine plan and therefore something good and praise-

worthy in itself and terrifying only to those who are not ready for it. The important thing is to be personally prepared, prepared for your own death and the death of the world. Not even the angels know when the world will end, but our Lord said it would be sudden and come like a thief in the night.

To return to our original question: Is this not an odd Gospel we have for the first Sunday of Advent? Not at all. On Christmas we will see the omnipotent Second Person of the Trinity, eternal God, voluntarily reduced to the condition of a helpless infant, ignored by the men He came to save, born in coldness and discomfort among dumb beasts of burden. He will be attended by two poverty-stricken creatures; His royal court will consist of a few odoriferous shepherds. Soon after birth He will be forced to flee His native land in fear of His very life. Yet this is the same God depicted in today's Gospel, the God of power and majesty who will come upon a cloud of glory at the end of the world to impose final and irrevocable justice, to mete out the ultimate rewards and punishments for every man.

Could it be that we are expected to keep this ultimate picture of our Redeemer and how the world ends in our mind's eye as we look upon the limp Child in Bethlehem's manger? Perhaps today's Gospel is to be played as a kind of counterpoint — more sensed than heard — running silently and deeply through the Christmas season. Certainly such a contrapuntal melody would render the angels' gladsome song richer in harmony, more complex, and deeper in significance. Perhaps we are expected to realize right from the beginning that the first coming of Christ was intended all along to prepare us for His final comings at the end of our life and the end of the world.



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE IDEA OF ADVENT

The liturgy of the Catholic Church is the working out of the virtue of religion on the social level. Liturgy is the official prayer and worship that the Church offers to God. It centers around the Mass and the sacraments. All things being equal, praying and worshiping through the liturgy is

much more efficacious than private prayer because Christ is present at every liturgical function. It may come as a shock to some to know there is no place in the Trappist daily schedule for recitation of the rosary in common. Certainly, each monk can say the rosary privately. But the rosary is an extraliturgical devotion and as such it has no place in the official Trappist routine.

In his encyclical *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius XII wrote: "Christ is present at the august Sacrifice of the altar both in the person of His minister and above all under the Eucharistic species. He is present in the Sacraments, infusing into them the power which makes them ready instruments of sanctification."

Although our Lord said, "Where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," the liturgy is more than simply getting together with six other people to recite some prayers; it takes its dignity and supreme efficacy from the fact that, as members of the Mystical Body of Christ, we should do our worshiping in conscious association with that Body and in union with its Head.

Recently there has been a drive to restore intelligent participation of the laity in the liturgy as the principal and ordinary way of prayer for the faithful. This movement is based on the concept that Christianity is essentially the religion of the worship of Jesus Christ and that the Church provides the sacraments for our use and sanctification. Long ago, Pope Pius X said: "The active participation in the most Holy Mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church is the primary and indispensable source of the true Christian spirit."

Everything in the liturgy pivots around Christ, the In-

carnate Word. In the course of the year's cycle, all the mysteries of Christ — the Incarnation, Redemption, Resurrection, Ascension — and all the virtues of which He is the most excellent Exemplar are set out for our inspiration and emulation. Now that we are in Advent, the beginning of the liturgical year, we have a perfect opportunity to intensify and enliven the process of our sanctification by taking an active part in the liturgy.

Nobody knows exactly how Advent started, but the custom is very ancient. In his *History of the Franks*, St. Gregory of Tours wrote that one of his predecessors, St. Perpetuus, who held the see around 480, decreed a fast three times a week from the feast of St. Martin, November 11, until Christmas. In 567, the second Council of Tours enjoined monks to fast from the beginning of December until Christmas. This penance was soon extended to the laity and was pushed back to begin on St. Martin's day. This forty-day Advent was nicknamed "St. Martin's Lent." From France the practice of doing penance during Advent spread to England as is noted in Venerable Bede's history. Today, the fast is not binding on the laity (although it is on most religious orders), and the duration of Advent has been reduced from forty days to four weeks.

Greek Catholics still observe the fast of Advent although it is less rigorous than the Lenten fast. It consists of forty days, beginning with November 14, the day on which the Eastern Church keeps the feast of St. Philip, the Apostle. During this entire period the people abstain from meat, butter, milk, and eggs; but they are allowed fish, oil, and wine which they are not allowed during Lent. Fasting in its strict sense is binding only on seven out of the forty days. This forty-day period is known as "St. Philip's Lent."

For us, Advent begins on the Sunday nearest St. Andrew's Day, November 30. Although the Church does not insist on formal fasting, it does everything it can to promote the spirit of penance. The *Te Deum*, the traditional hymn of rejoicing, is omitted from all but festive Offices. The *Gloria* is not said in ferial Masses because it is not yet time for those wondrous words which the angels will sing out at Bethlehem. Purple is the proper color of the season for the vestments and in some areas it once was the custom to wear black. The organ is not to be played except midway through Advent on Gaudete Sunday. Except by permission of the bishop, the solemn nuptial blessing may not be given at marriages from the beginning of Advent until Christmas.

Advent should be for us a time of purification, the time when we make straight the path by which Jesus will enter our souls. Christ comes to us in three different ways. "In the first coming," says St. Bernard, "He comes in the flesh and in weakness; in the second, He comes in spirit and power; in the third, He comes in glory and in majesty." During Advent especially, the Church invites us to meditate on this threefold coming of Christ: His first coming on earth was through the Incarnation, fulfilled and completed that first Christmas night at Bethlehem; His second coming takes place when He enters the souls of individual men through sanctifying grace; His third coming will be for judgment, both particular at the end of our life and general at the end of the world.

When Christ came the first time, His own people had no room for Him. Thirty-three years later they still refused to accept Him, offered Him only a cross a die on. During the season of Advent and Christmas, Christ comes a second time in a special way to each of us. He knocks at the door

of our hearts, perhaps at one time so forcibly that we cannot help but notice Him; at another time, so softly that it requires close attention to realize that He is asking admission. He comes to visit us personally to ask if there is room for Him in our hearts, for He wishes to be born again in each of us.

Like the Jews of old who refused Christ the first time, we can refuse Him at His second coming which is to our individual souls. But no one will be able to refuse Christ when He comes for the third and last time, that is, when He comes for us at the moment of death and for our particular judgment. Then Christ will come to tell us the good news of our glory and eternal joy, or to deliver the infinitely sad news of personal damnation and perpetual punishment.

There is a definite relationship between the progressions of the liturgical year and the stages of our spiritual life. Spiritual life begins with the “purgative way” — the first stage of perfection in which we try to root out vices, learn to control our sense appetites, and practice fundamental virtues. Advent, literally *a coming*, is a preparation for the coming of the Saviour, and as such it too is a period of personal purification and penance. Our spiritual life is in truth a series of new beginnings, and the liturgical cycle comes round each year to inspire us to fresh endeavor.

Let us enter wholeheartedly and enthusiastically into the spirit of Advent, the very first phase of the liturgical year, and permit the Church to sanctify us through her liturgy, the official and most effective form of worship; for we know that when we kneel in church to offer a prayer in union with the Church and the officiating priest, Christ our eternal High Priest kneels beside us and offers the prayer with us to make it doubly efficacious.



THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE LAST OF THE PROPHETS

John the Baptist was a strangely wonderful and mysterious character. A kinsman of Christ, his entire life was spent in close connection with the God-Man. He was a highly privileged person over whom Christ shed some of His own mystery and magic.

Several striking parallels between the life of Jesus and John the Baptist suggest themselves: the same angel announces their births, both are born without original sin, both live a secluded life in preparation for public careers, both preach penance, both are executed because they incite the wrath of those rightfully condemned.

The father of John the Baptist was Zachary; his mother, Elizabeth. They had grown old without having children and, like any Jewish couple of that time, they bore their stigma with heavy disappointment. Zachary was a priest and one day when he was offering incense in the Temple the archangel Gabriel appeared to him and said he would yet have a son. Moreover, this son was to become someone quite special, he was to be the forerunner and precursor of the Messias.

Unfortunately, Zachary made the mistake of asking for a sign to confirm the authenticity of the angel's message. Did he really doubt the angel's word? Or, in requesting verification, was he merely acting as other good men, such as Abraham and Moses, had acted in similar circumstances? We don't know what Zachary's motives were, but we know that he got a sign all right, and one that literally left him speechless. Zachary was struck dumb for more than nine months until his son was born.

From the beginning, this child of Zachary and Elizabeth was extraordinary. When Mary came to visit her cousin Elizabeth, John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb when he recognized the unborn Christ. John was sanctified while still in the womb and so was born without original sin — although he was not conceived without original sin. Most of his young manhood he spent in solitude in the desert, preparing by prayer and mortification for his great

vocation. He lived a most austere life, wearing a crude garb common to the nomadic shepherds (a rough cloak of camel skin) and eating locusts and wild honey.

About six months before our Lord appeared in public, John began to preach. He had one theme: Repent, change your way of thinking, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Unlike the previous false prophets, John's preaching was so sincere and had such a strong moral tone that he attracted a large audience — enough, at least, to incur the jealousy of the Pharisees.

In spite of his popularity, there never was any doubt in John's mind about his function. He knew that he was simply the man chosen by God to introduce the Messias. He described himself as a voice crying in the wilderness, one who was to come before the Messias to make the rough ways smooth for Him, make straight His paths. Later, when his own followers complained of the popularity of Jesus, John said bluntly that he was to decrease while Christ was to increase. He said he was not worthy to untie the sandals of Christ. When our Lord came to be baptized by John, it took some convincing by Him before John could be persuaded to perform that symbolic act.

Two of the Apostles were sent directly by John to Christ; they had been followers of the Baptist. These two Apostles were John and Andrew. It was Andrew who introduced his brother Peter, soon to become the first pope, to Christ. So in addition to his other laurels, John the Baptist was a top-notch scout and recruiter of vocations for his Master.

Toward the end of his time, John denounced King Herod for living in adultery with his brother's wife, Herodias. As his reward for publicizing this embarrassing fact, John was clapped into prison. That was not enough for Herodias.

She knew John was her enemy and would not rest until she had his head.

Before his execution, John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was really the Messias. We do not think John's faith was waning at all, but he probably wanted Christ to make a definitive statement and thereby settle the question in the minds of his personal followers. However, it was not Christ's plan to make a declaration at this time. Most of the Jews were expecting a military messias who would deliver them by fire and sword from the bondage of the hated Romans. Christ was hard at work chipping away at this petrified error; He planned to reveal His spiritual messiasship only gradually. Even with His precursor in prison and soon to be beheaded, Jesus could not give this friend and kinsman the satisfaction of a definite answer.

He did point to His miracles as implicit proof of His divinity and He did perform some miracles just for the occasion. Jesus said: "Go and report to John what you have heard and seen: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise, the poor have the Gospel preached to them." As the messengers were leaving, Christ gave John his final mead of praise: "Amen I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist." If John or his disciples needed any more proof, this must have been enough. But the proclamation of messiasship ringing out with bell-like clarity, this John was denied.

John the Baptist was more of a hero than we suspect because he was expendable and he knew it. He saw his situation clearly, agreed to accept the role, and bowed his head in humility before the divine command. He died in jail at the whim of a sinful woman.

The story of John is told at this time every year because he sums up in his life and personality the spirit of Advent. He was the forerunner of the Christ who is coming. John the Baptist spent most of his life getting ready for the coming of Christ; he spent all his public life trying to prepare the Jewish people. By means of the Gospel, he is still telling us to repent, to change our ways, to get set for the kingdom of God. John the Baptist calls to us down the centuries, entreating us to smooth the way for the Redeemer, to straighten out the crooked paths of our lives and demolish the roadblocks of sin so that He can approach us without delay or hindrance. On Gaudete Sunday, the halfway mark in Advent, ought we not pay some heed to John the Baptist?



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE NEW CHOSEN PEOPLE

When the Magi showed up in Jerusalem looking for the new King of the Jews, King Herod got very annoyed. He summoned the chief priests and Scribes and asked them what it was all about. They said the strangers from the East

were undoubtedly right, this could very well be the time predicted for the birth of the Messias. The place would be Bethlehem.

Thirty years later, the Jewish priests and Levites sent a committee out to John the Baptist in the desert to find out who he was. They were afraid he might be the Messias. They were still expecting Him to appear at any moment.

False prophets had capitalized on this general expectation and had done a thriving business. Quite a few frauds had appeared in recent years but there always was room for one more because the older ones kept getting themselves killed off; they had developed the dangerous habit of leading uprisings against the government. Everyone, in his own way, was expecting the Messias about this time. It was not surprising. The entire Old Testament was one long prophecy foretelling the advent of the Redeemer. The New Testament can be considered the fulfillment of that prophecy. God had prepared the Jews for centuries for the coming of the Redeemer and now the period of waiting was almost over.

It should not have been difficult to recognize the Messias once He came, for God had planted plenty of clues. For instance, He was to be of the family of David; the prophet Jeremias had predicted that centuries ago. Micheas contributed the information about Bethlehem. "And thou, Bethlehem . . . art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall come forth he that is to be the ruler in Israel." The time of the coming had been foretold by Daniel, Aggeus, and Malachias. Most remarkable of all, our Redeemer would be born of a virgin. Isaias, the prophet of the Nativity and the Passion, had said: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel."

The Jews, as a race and a nation, had a special vocation. They were the chosen people of God, they were a privileged people because the Saviour of the human race was to come from their ranks. That certainly was a unique distinction and the main reason why the Jews enjoyed the favor and protection of God for so long. God helped them fight their enemies, but He punished them whenever they slid back into idolatry. God sent prophet after prophet to remind them of their vocation, but one after the other the people murdered the prophets.

The whole history of the Jews from the time of Moses down to the coming of Christ is the history of a swinging pendulum. When the Jews forgot what they were and slipped into the vile practices of their pagan neighbors, God punished them — usually by permitting their enemies to conquer them. When the Jews remained faithful to their vocation as the chosen people, God rewarded them.

For the Jewish people, the Old Testament was one long Advent, their time of preparation. God was very fair with the Jews, very generous, but very strict because He wanted them to be adequately prepared for the coming of His Son. But as a matter of fact, the Jews as a race did not prove equal to their destiny in the history of mankind. Stiff-necked and hard of heart, not only did they turn a deaf ear to Jesus during His lifetime, they ended up by killing Him.

The Church, in celebrating the liturgy of Advent, reminds us in the most dramatic way possible of just what our obligations are as the new chosen people. These few weeks of Advent constitute our Old Testament, our preparation for the coming of the Redeemer. The Jews failed to receive the Saviour because they were not properly pre-

pared. That was completely their own fault because God gave them every opportunity. If in the past we have not been faithful to God as His new chosen people, we have another chance to do better.

Christmas should be a time of spiritual rebirth, of beginning anew. The annual anniversary of Christmas should mean for us a rebirth of grace in our souls. If this is to take place, however, we must make a decent preparation. We prepare for Christmas in all kinds of ways. The external preparation — shopping for presents, new clothes, Christmas trees, decorating, and cleaning — is the least important. More important is to get ready for Christmas by cleaning, decorating, and clothing our souls. We clean up our soul by the sacrament of Penance, and we can scrub it bright with little self-imposed, rough-edged mortifications. We decorate and clothe our souls with sanctifying grace, gained in many ways but especially by the fervent reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

So that is what Advent is all about. It is a time set aside to get ourselves ready for the Christ Child's birthday. In the closing hours before that indescribably momentous event, we ought to intensify our preparations. If you have not yet started, it is never really too late.

PART TWO: CHRISTMAS DAY



DECEMBER 25

MIDNIGHT MASS

All nature held its breath the night Jesus was born. There was a strange, almost palpable, electricity in the air. Everyone knew the time for the Redeemer was at hand. The prophets had foretold His coming and now the expectations

of the ages where about to be fulfilled. Nowhere in all Judea was the air more charged than in Bethlehem, the royal city of David. Let us try to re-create the scene in our imagination.

Let there be new snow, God the Father's personal Christmas gift, gently smoothing over the ugly scars of a weary earth and, magic-like, transforming the gray winter world into a glittering silver fairyland of children laughing and warm-wrapped maidens and strong shouting youths. Let there be moonlight "dropping on treetops like blue cobweb" and sparkling on ice crusty branches as though nature had put on cold jewelry for this night of nights. Let there be a light winter wind capriciously running about among blue-green cedars and along rooftops, a wind softly murmuring spritely winter melodies such as men play on harps and flutes and violins.

Suddenly the sky is split with a heavenly light and there are angels singing as no earthly choir has ever sung. And who is the exclusive audience for this extraordinary concert of heavenly harmonies? — A few rough shepherds, coarse and dirty, the smell of their flock heavy upon them. At that time shepherds were a despised minority. The Pharisees had no use for them because they neglected the innumerable and impractical ritualistic purifications. Shepherds were not even acceptable as legal witnesses. Why, then, were these poor men the first to hear of the Nativity? Why not the important and influential Pharisees sitting warm and comfortable by their fires at home? Why was not the message of the angels first delivered to the court of Herod the Great, just six miles to the north in Jerusalem? Why these shepherds?

The shepherds were the first to be told of the birth of the Messias because in this way God intended to show His

love for the poor. From the first moment of His birth, Christ was to be a sign of contradiction; from the beginning He identified Himself with the underdog, not with the successful and powerful of this world.

When the shepherds found the Nativity cave, they saw a carpenter, a virgin, and a Child in a manger. The carpenter, of course, was St. Joseph, the unsung hero of the Christmas drama. Frequently, we picture St. Joseph as a gray-bearded old man, already bent and stooping with age. There is no evidence in Scripture for such a portrait. Why should we not think of St. Joseph as still a young man, perhaps just a few years older than Mary herself? Mary was only a teen-ager, for Jewish girls married young at that time.

There are several arguments favoring St. Joseph's youth. Certainly a spouse close to Mary's age would make a more sympathetic companion, would be better able to find work and provide for the Holy Family. Moreover, if we think of St. Joseph as fairly young, the virtues we associate with him become even brighter. Patience, for example, we rather expect in seasoned and experienced men; it is all the more notable in the young. St. Joseph's silence appears more praiseworthy; we do not have one word spoken by him in the New Testament. His absolute confidence in God and unquestioning obedience to His orders — as when the angel appeared to him during sleep instructing him to flee with mother and Child to Egypt — this comes through as all the more remarkable for his youth. Finally, St. Joseph as patron of the workingman takes on sharper outlines, comes into clearer focus if we think of him as still young and virile.

Together with the shepherds, St. Joseph forms a symbol of the poverty of the divine birth. Mary is the living symbol of the purity of that birth. St. Luke said in his Gospel:

"There was no room for them in the inn." Is there any particular reason why St. Luke should have said *for them*? The hostels of Judea were very crude by our standards. They consisted of an unroofed walled enclosure, in which the camels and donkeys were bedded down, and one large room which was a sort of lean-to built against the outside wall of the animals' enclosure. This was the place where travelers ordinarily slept. They simply threw their blankets on the ground wherever they could find space. A few unfurnished private stalls were available for those who could afford that relative luxury.

The Blessed Virgin knew it was almost time for Jesus to be born. Because of her incomparable purity and modesty, she wanted privacy for the birth of her Child. It is true that most people were not so fastidious about birth at that time and more than one baby had first seen the light of day in just such a public inn as Bethlehem's and nobody thought of it as extraordinary. That was not good enough for Mary, however, and although she was fatigued with the four days' journey from Nazareth, she preferred to push on to the hills outside Bethlehem and take her chances on finding an abandoned cave. It was common knowledge that there were many such caves in the area used by shepherds in foul weather.

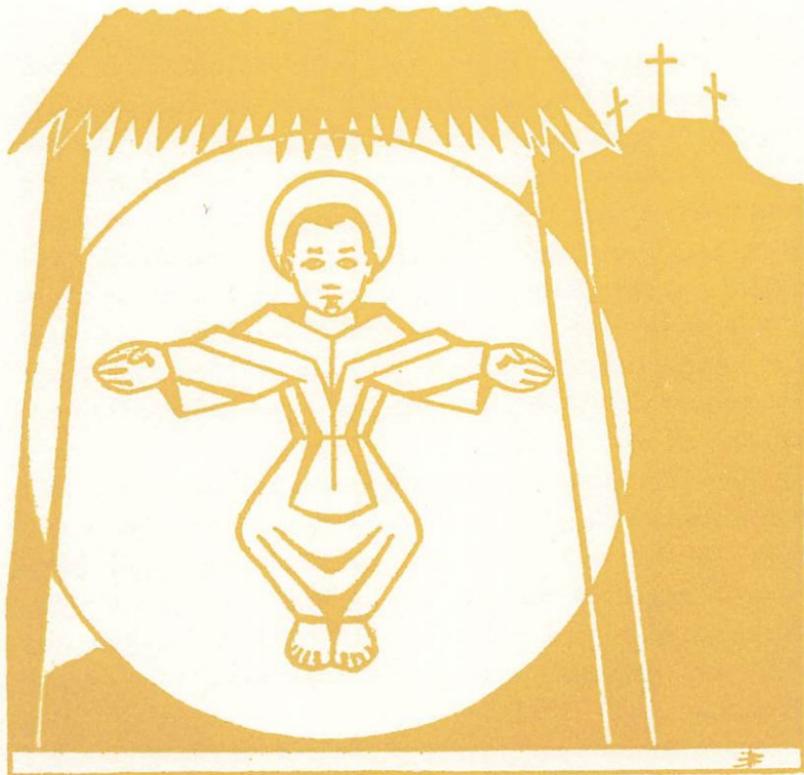
The birth of Jesus caused Mary no pain. We know this to be true because Mary was the Immaculate Conception. She was not cursed with original sin and therefore did not suffer the punishments of original sin, one of which is the pangs of childbirth. Besides, St. Luke tells us that she herself took care of the Christ Child, wrapping Him in swaddling clothes and laying Him in a manger.

Thus did the Saviour of mankind make His appearance

in this world. He could have been born of wealthy parents; He chose to be born into a poor family to provide us with an example and to emphasize His love for the poor. He could have been born in the summertime; He chose to come in the winter so He could start suffering immediately. He could have raised His infant hand and struck Herod dead; He chose to run away to a foreign country and thereby add to His inconvenience and suffering. He could have come as a full-grown man in the strength of manhood; He chose the humiliation of ordinary gestation and birth. Perhaps He chose this way because He knew the universal appeal of a new baby.

Physically, Joseph and Mary were pretty miserable on that first Christmas night. The cave was cold and damp and dark, the livestock in it smelled. But Joseph and Mary hardly noticed all that, so thrilled were they that the Redeemer had arrived and so amazed in their humility that they had been chosen to play the principal roles in the Christmas epic.

Let us imitate Joseph and Mary and try to be amazed. We certainly *should* be amazed. We should be so struck by the mystery of the Incarnation that our astonishment and wonder will last from one Christmas to the next. It is terribly amazing if you think about it, that God, Creator and Lord of all the universe, should so dignify and elevate human nature as to become one of us. Even the angels in heaven cannot make that boast. Let us try to be a little amazed at Christmas time, amazed that God should love us enough to become one of us, like to us in all things except sin. Let us try to love God enough to become like Him in all things through grace.



DECEMBER 25

THE MASS AT DAWN

In a sense, Christmas begins in the Garden of Eden and ends on Calvary. Christmas begins with God's promise of a Redeemer. On almost the very first page of the Old Testament we find that promise being given: "I will put enmities between thee [the devil] and the woman, and thy seed and

her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel." Taken in its typical sense, God is saying that He will make Mary and the devil enemies. Mary will crush the head of the serpent-devil by giving birth to the God-Man, Christ our Redeemer, and thereby prepare the way for our redemption and the overthrow of the devil's kingdom.

God promised to send a Redeemer immediately after Adam committed original sin — it is almost as though God were impatient to have the redemption get started. Despite the heinous presence of Adam's recent crime, God's solicitude for us is nowhere more evident. He has favored us in many ways more than the angels. We can think of God talking to the fallen Adam in the Garden of Paradise and looking down the corridors of the centuries, already anticipating the first Christmas in His eternal mind.

We can date that first Christmas, the day when the Second Person of the Trinity appeared on this earth as Incarnate God, as the start of our active redemption. It could have ended that same day because God the Father would have willingly accepted the shyest smile or the tiniest cry of His Son as adequate and complete compensation for the sins committed against Him by men. But, as a matter of fact, Christmas was just the beginning.

Calvary was to be the culmination and climax of Christ's redemptive work. That is why we can say that the Christmas story extends from the Garden of Paradise to Bethlehem to Calvary. Considered in this way our redemption becomes a superlative epic unfolding down through the years from the first man, who betrayed the race to the devil by sinning, to another Man, who ransomed us from the devil by dying.

The Christmas story is concerned with all the elemental things: birth and life and death, appearance and reality, grace and sin.

This is not the ordinary way we think of Christmas, of course. On the surface, we are taken up with all the pleasant incidentals we associate with Christmas time: children happy in the once-a-year paradise of shiny new toys, older youngsters exulting in a respite from school, grownups indulging in the welcome obligation of exchanging gifts, going home to visit loved ones perhaps unseen for many months, the bracing aroma of fir trees, walking home in silent snow after Midnight Mass, the festive Christmas dinner. In a vague sort of way, however, we know that these are not the most important things about Christmas, that they are just the trimmings and decorations on the Christmas tree.

For the sincere Christian, Christmas means many important things. One of the things it means is motherhood. True, Christmas belongs in a special way to children, but it also belongs in a special way to mothers. Is not Christmas one of the feasts of the divine maternity?

There is something very sacred about being a mother. To understand just how sacred, we must first understand something about creation. Actually, we cannot understand very much because it is a mystery. In creating, God makes something out of nothing, from absolutely no pre-existing matter. Before God created the world, nothing existed except God. God brought the world into being from nothing. The transition from "nothing" to "something" is an infinite jump and only an infinite Being is capable of bringing it off. This power is such that it could never be delegated to a creature; no creature could ever be used by God even as an instrument of creation.

The closest anyone or anything comes to taking part in creation is a mother who co-operates with God to produce a human being. A mother prepares the material which is destined for union with a spiritual soul that can come into existence only by the direct action of God. Every mother shares with God the privilege of bringing another human being into existence, that is, a man with an immortal soul destined to spend eternity with God in heaven.

God must have thought very highly of human motherhood when He chose this means of having His Son become Man. God could have selected many other ways. Jesus could have come into the world a grown man without any human parents at all. But God wanted to show how He felt about human motherhood; He forever dignified motherhood when He decreed that the Incarnation of His Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, should take place with the co-operation of a human mother. This is the finest compliment that the vocation of motherhood could ever be paid. Because Christmas is Christ's birthday, it is also a feast honoring His mother and all mothers.

Although Christmas is primarily a time for rejoicing over the coming of the infant Redeemer, there is a note of sadness running through this symphony of joy. The physical discomfort of the Nativity cave, the fact that only the poor of the earth bothered to attend His birth, these hard little nuggets of reality seem to foreshadow the final destiny of the Christ Child. As we see Him lying in His crib, a tiny baby, it is hard to think of Him stretched tight on a cross in a mere thirty-three years. But for this was He born, for this came He into the world. The real Son of God by nature became Man that men might become sons of God by adoption. Jesus deigned to become a sharer in our humanity so

that we might become sharers in His divinity. We share in His divinity through sanctifying grace. Grace, in some mysterious way, is literally a participation in the very life of God. Through grace we are elevated to the supernatural level and partake of God's own nature. Grace makes us Godlike.

By Adam's sin, man fell from grace and the supernatural order. It was only through the redemption wrought by Christ that we were restored to that order. In the present arrangement, the redemption would not have been possible without the Incarnation. Bethlehem was only the prelude to Calvary. If there had been no crib at Bethlehem, there would have been no cross at Golgotha; between Christmas and Good Friday there exists an inseparable and necessary connection.

Perhaps Mary suspected something of what the future held for her Child because St. Luke tells us:

"So they [the shepherds] went with haste, and they found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in the manger. And when they had seen, they understood what had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard marvelled at the things told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept in mind all these words, pondering them in her heart."

Simeon's prophecy on the occasion of presenting the forty-day-old Infant in the Temple could only have added to Mary's sorrow: "This child is set for the fall and the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted: and thy own soul a sword shall pierce."

As every mother's life must be, so was Mary's brushed with sorrow. The birth at Christmas already contains a hint of death, for life will come full circle and for the Christ Child the end was to be the crucifixion. No ordinary death

would be His, but a death to ransom us, the darlings of His creation, His dear prodigals. The promise made in Eden thousands of years before was about to be fulfilled. God had sent His Son as He had promised and the redemption could begin.

In many ways that redemption is still going on. If it had its first stirrings in the Garden of Eden, it extends through Bethlehem and Calvary into the present. The redemption is still operative in many ways but most of all in the seven sacraments instituted by Christ. The Church Fathers called all the sacraments "relics" of the redemption, but the name applies with particular cogency to the Eucharist, in which we have the continuing presence and power of the Redeemer Himself. This is the best possible Christmas present Jesus could have given us: the gift of Himself, a gift so fantastic that only God could have thought of it.

When you receive Jesus in the Eucharist at Christmas, thank Him for this best of gifts. And if God is so infinitely generous as to surrender Himself to us, can we not abandon ourselves absolutely and without reserve to Him? If you do surrender yourself to God — and everyone must sooner or later if we expect to get into heaven — do not hold back one small fragment of yourself, reserve nothing for human pride or sensuality. Do not permit the devil or the world or sensual appetites to take title to one molecule of your being but give yourself without condition to the God who has given everything to you. This is the best Christmas present you can give God and, incidentally, the best you can give yourself.



DECEMBER 25

THE THIRD MASS

Christmas is a story about the helplessness of God. Now, we know that God is all powerful. He created this world and other worlds we cannot see, the microcosm of the atom and the macrocosm of interstellar space, and creating them

never cost God an ounce of energy. God need only will a thing and it is done.

But there was one moment in time when this God of omnipotence deliberately made Himself helpless. That moment began in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve when the God-Man was born, an infant in a manger.

In a way, the Nativity was for Jesus a time of receiving, not giving. As an infant, He had nothing He could give. He had to depend completely on His mother for everything. The Creator who clothed the world in nature's splendor, who cloaked craggy mountains with capes of ermine snow, who smothered whole countries with the splashing color of tropical flowers, who streaked the sun's dawning with heaven's own pastels of green and blue and rose and stained the sunset with streams of His own bright red blood, this God who dressed the world let Himself be dressed by one of His own creatures.

God made Himself helpless to show that Christmas is a time not only for giving but for receiving. Anyone who has can give, and perhaps give gracefully. It is a little harder to receive gracefully.

If you have a wealth of advice, for example, it is very satisfying to bestow some of it on those whom you consider poorer than yourself in intellect or experience. The process of taking counsel is a little less enjoyable. If you are on the receiving end of a strong dose of advice, it is hard not to squirm. The implication always is present that the adviser has assumed at least a temporary superiority, and that can be a jolt to your pride.

If you are poor and forced by circumstances to accept a dole, that hurts pride too. If you are sick and must be cared for by others, it may be difficult to respond graciously. Some

people, from a lifetime habit of doing for themselves, resent assistance and rebel.

We know that the Second Person of the Trinity could have come on earth as an adult. He could have come at the head of a legion of angels and made a big impression. He purposely chose the most humble way possible. Jesus chose to be born a helpless babe, entirely dependent upon creatures.

There is a wonderful lesson of holy simplicity in this aspect of the Christmas story. There is so much that we could receive if we only knew how and were prepared to be humble and grateful. Sometimes a small suggestion for bettering our habits is given by wife or husband, parent or friend. Often these hints are not even put into words but are conveyed by a glance or a casual gesture; those who know us best rarely need to put their feelings into words. Assistance kindly offered we should accept in the spirit of charity with which it is given.

Most of all, we should keep our soul open for the help that God wants to give us. Christmas is a time of extraordinary grace. If we are well disposed, it can be a time of great spiritual progress.

Our Lord once said after He had grown up that unless we become like little children we would not get to heaven. He meant that we would have to shed the false sophistification that we acquire by trafficking in the world, the slick veneer of amorality that quickly renders us apathetic and listless for the things of the spirit.

Isn't it strange that when we were children we wanted to grow up as fast as possible, and now that we are adults we wish we were children again? Why should that be? Is it partly because we realize that somehow we were better then?

"Childhood innocence" is not an empty phrase and unless we get back to the honesty, simplicity, and artlessness of the child we are steering in the wrong direction.

That is one lesson we can learn from the Child in the Crib. And perhaps that is just one more reason why God came as a child — to teach us how to receive help graciously and gratefully, help from our fellow men and, most of all, help from God.

PART THREE: THE OCTAVE



DECEMBER 26

ST. STEPHEN, FIRST WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE

Traditionally, the twelve days following Christmas and ending with the feast of the Epiphany have been a time for general rejoicing and celebration. In England, a public festival was always held on the twelfth night after Christmas.

It is possible that Shakespeare wrote *Twelfth Night* for this feast at the request of Queen Elizabeth. It is certain that the play was performed for the London law students at the Inns of Court on one such feast.

Franciscans celebrate Epiphany with the annual drawing of patron saints. Each friar gets by lot a patron saint for the year, a motto, and a particular virtue to pursue. Occasionally the virtue and motto drawn are devastatingly appropriate and lead to sly, un-Franciscan winks around the dinner table.

The idea of celebrating *after* Christmas and spreading out the fun is good. It counteracts the temptation to excessive preparation and celebration before Christmas. Immoderate activity can easily wear us out for the day itself and destroy any spiritual preparation we have been able to make. One candidate for quick elimination readily suggests itself: the Christmas office party, usually held on the very vigil of Christmas. Maybe we ought to get back to the old idea of stretching out the celebrating through the twelve days of Christmas.

To some it may seem a little odd to inaugurate a season of festivity with the feast of a martyr. Isn't it slightly macabre to commemorate blood and death immediately after the birthday of our infant Redeemer? Not at all. Christ was born to be a sign of contradiction. Nothing He ever did or said fitted in with the world's view of reality. The King of power and glory deliberately came as a helpless child. He who was infinitely rich made Himself dismally poor. The Prince of Peace was indirectly the cause of setting husbands and wives, parents and children at enmity (breaking up homes was never Christ's intention, of course, but it was inevitable that sometimes members of a family would

split on the issue of allegiance to Christianity). He picked out the weak to confound the strong. It is perfectly appropriate that on the day following the feast of the birth of Christ the Church has placed the feast of the saint who first shed his blood for Christ. Moreover, the Church follows up the feast of its protomartyr with that of the Holy Innocents and St. Thomas à Becket.

Our rejoicing, then, should be tempered. For the faithful followers of the Sign of Contradiction, life is indeed a warfare and we know that we have here no lasting city. We know that from the crib and peace of Bethlehem on Christmas Day, Christ must go to the cross and havoc of Jerusalem on Good Friday. The Incarnation did indeed signal the beginnings of Christianity, but this was to be a Christianity that for many thousands would end in suffering and death. After the Holy Innocents, the first one to give his life was St. Stephen. After Joseph and Mary, the nearest place to the Christ Child at the crib is assigned to St. Stephen. "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends."

St. Stephen first appears in the *Acts of the Apostles*. He was one of the seven deacons chosen to assist the Apostles. The deacons were to carry on the ordinary work of social service that had become just too much for the Apostles themselves whose primary assignment was propagating Christianity. Stephen was the chief deacon. Apparently he was a powerful speaker and even worked miracles. At any rate, he was good enough to incense the enemies of the infant Church and they challenged him in open debate.

When Stephen handed his opponents a resounding defeat they proved to be poor losers. Bribing false witnesses, they hauled him up before the Sanhedrin on charges of blas-

phemy, at that time a capital offense. The old formula used to trap Christ was still workable. "And they stirred up the people and the elders and the Scribes, and, running together, they seized him and brought him to the Sanhedrin." The strategy was to make the accusation at the highest pitch of popular agitation. The main charges preferred against Stephen were two:

1. He was alleged to have maligned Moses and the Law and the traditions which Moses handed down.

2. He spoke against the Temple.

In an eloquent defense, Stephen rapidly sketched the history of the Jewish race, pointing out how in the beginning the Jews rejected Moses, how they disobeyed him and fell back into idolatry with the incident of the golden calf, how at the present moment they were not really observing the Law of Moses. Up to this point, Stephen had made a trenchant speech. Despite this powerful exposition, we can easily understand that Stephen's listeners were not prepared for the stinging truths that came rushing up at the end and threw them into a fit of snarling rage.

"Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ear, you always oppose the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so you do also. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One [Jesus], of whom you have now been the betrayers and murderers, you who received the Law as an ordinance of angels and did not keep it." Now as they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and gnashed their teeth at him.

Stephen paid no attention to his personal danger. In fact it seems he did not even see his persecutors for as he finished his defense he "looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he

said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' " That was the last straw for the lynchers; they needed no more excuse. "But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed upon him all together. And they cast him out of the city and stoned him."

One of the bystanders who approved this treachery, in fact held the coats for the respectable people doing the stoning, was a young man named Saul. Later he changed his name to Paul and simultaneously changed his convictions to those of the man he saw die that day. Perhaps the seeds of Paul's conversion were planted on this occasion, the day of the first martyrdom for the Faith.

St. Luke reports that on the day of St. Stephen's death a bloody persecution broke out against the Church in Jerusalem and the Christians were forced to flee. They scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This, however, proved to be providential and dispersed Christianity throughout Palestine as no other means possibly could.

The word *martyr* comes from the Greek word for *witness*. The idea is that a martyr is a witness of the highest caliber, someone willing to die to witness to the truth of what he believes. St. Stephen was the first martyr, the first witness for the Faith, the prototype for the countless martyrs who would die for Christ in the centuries to come.

The feast of St. Stephen serves to remind us that our feasting should be seasoned with the sobering thought that, although the first age of martyrdom which began with St. Stephen is past, a new age of martyrdom has come. Although the reality of that fact may appear remote to us, the truth is that many Catholics do not share our joy of Christmas and in fact are suffering and dying in other lands for the same

Faith that prompted St. Stephen to sacrifice his life. This feast reminds us in a new way that Christ was born but to die and that, soul-pierced, Mary's sorrow would grow sharper and more overwhelming as Jesus grew older and approached the culmination of His suffering on the cross.



DECEMBER 27

ST. JOHN, EVANGELIST OF CHRISTMAS

Ordinarily we think of St. Luke as the official narrator of the Christmas story. It is only in his Gospel that we get the details of what happened at Bethlehem, but it is possible that he in turn got his facts from St. John.

The only eyewitness and source of information for many of the things this Gospel tells us about the conception, birth, and infancy of Jesus could have been no one but Mary. . . . Whether or not Luke knew Mary personally we do not know; but even granted that he had never spoken with her, he could still have obtained the very precise information she was able to furnish from the Apostle John, the adoptive son whom Jesus gave her as he died and in whose home she lived after the death of her own son.*

St. Luke was not one of the original Apostles and in fact he had never seen Jesus. He was a Greek from Antioch who was converted to Christianity perhaps more than ten years after the death of Jesus.

St. John the Evangelist deserves a place near the Christmas crib because he composed his Gospel partly as an answer to contemporary heretics (he called them liars and anti-christs) who were then attacking the very heart and core of Christmas, the mystery of the Incarnation. St. John probably wrote his Gospel at Ephesus around A.D. 100. Several virulent heresies had sprung up that struck at the central doctrine of Christianity; these heresies attacked either the humanity or the divinity of Christ. The Ebionites, for example, taught that Christ was a mere man. The Docetae went to the other extreme and said that Christ was God all right but that's all He was, He only "appeared" to have a human body.

Either error is pernicious. If you do not believe that Christ was and is one divine person with two natures, human and divine, then the entire doctrine of the redemption collapses in a heap. If Christ were not divine, His sacrifice would not have been worthy of God the Father; it would have had no

* G. Ricciotti, *The Life of Christ*, 1947, The Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, p. 122.

more value than that of an ordinary man's. If Christ were not human, His sacrifice would not be representative of us or meritorious for the human race.

It was to combat these false teachings that St. John, now an old man and the last surviving Apostle, wrote in defense of the true meaning and significance of Christmas less than seventy years after Jesus had died. That he was filled to overflowing with the theme of the Incarnate Word, the Logos, is clear from the very first words of his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God;
and the Word was God . . .
And the Word was made flesh,
and dwelt among us.

For his theological sweep, sublime and piercing, St. John is symbolized by the eagle. His is the most theological and spiritual of all the Gospels. This impression is borne out also by the Apocalypse, the prophetic book written earlier while he was exiled on the Island of Patmos.

St. John first appears in the New Testament as a discovery of that star talent scout and "vocation recruiter," St. John the Baptist. Although he, himself, may never have been aware of it, part of the Baptist's work as precursor of Christ was to line up likely candidates for the apostleship. At any rate when Jesus returned from His forty-day fast in the desert, John the Baptist pointed Him out with a ringing "Behold the lamb of God!" Two of the Baptist's own disciples, Andrew and John, the future evangelist, heard him speak and followed Jesus immediately. This was their first call.

In the beginning at least, the Apostles did not stay with Jesus all the time. After the marriage feast of Cana, John

and Andrew apparently returned to the fishing business. It was at Lake Genesareth that John and his brother James received the second invitation from Jesus and both reacted with characteristic spontaneity. "And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; they also were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them. And they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him."

Peter and his brother Andrew, John and his brother James were the first Apostles to be chosen and they remained the chief ones until the end. They enjoyed the special love of Jesus. Peter, James, and John were the only ones present at the raising of the daughter of Jairus and they were the only ones to see Jesus glorified in the Transfiguration. At Jesus' request, John and Peter made the preparations for the Last Supper. It was the disciple whom Jesus loved who leaned his head on Christ's breast at the Last Supper and heard the beating of His heart.

After Jesus was captured, John was the first to slip into Pilate's courtyard and managed to smuggle in his friend Peter so they both could be close to the Master at the end. Finally, it was to John that Jesus entrusted His mother when He was dying. As St. Peter Damian has said: "St. Peter is given the Church, the mother of men; but St. John is assigned Mary, the mother of God."

When the news of Christ's Resurrection was brought to the Apostles it was John and Peter who literally ran to the tomb. Toward the end of his life, John was ready to suffer a martyr's death as his fellow Apostles had, but that was not to be God's will for him. The Romans did, in fact, throw him into a caldron of boiling oil but St. John, now an old man, jumped out unscathed and perhaps livelier than ever

— as though the oil had merely lubricated his aging joints.

John the Evangelist, like his former teacher John the Baptist, was fully aware of his role. He wanted only to decrease while Jesus increased. St. John does not mention his own name once in his Gospel. He wrote it only after the other three evangelists had completed theirs. He wrote to fight encroaching error and to fill in the gaps left by the synoptics. Scripture scholars estimate that 92 per cent of his material is original. In addition to the Gospel, he wrote three epistles and the Apocalypse. Nothing new has been added to the deposit of Faith since St. John the Evangelist laid down his pen.

St. John did not die for Christ as did St. Stephen (although he counted it an honor to be scourged and to shed his blood for Him), but next to the sacrifice of martyrdom is the sacrifice of virginity. Still a youth of less than twenty when he joined Jesus, St. John never married. Like Mary and Joseph and Christ Himself, he was absolutely chaste. Perhaps this is one reason why he was the disciple whom Jesus especially loved. While St. Stephen rightfully and proudly wears the red robe of martyrdom at the crib, it is St. John's privilege to attend the Christ Child wearing the dazzling white robe of perfect purity.



DECEMBER 28

THE VOICE OF RACHEL

Herod the Great was one of the meanest men in all history. The chief claim to greatness of this notorious tyrant appears to be based on the enormity of his crimes. In 37 B.C. he conquered Jerusalem with the help of the Roman legions and speedily murdered forty-five adherents of his rival,

Antigonus. Two years later he had his brother-in-law, Aristobulus, drowned in a pool in Jericho. Aristobulus was only sixteen at the time and had just recently been appointed High Priest by Herod himself.

In 29 B.C. Herod killed his wife, Mariamne, because he believed lies whispered in his ear by unscrupulous courtiers. Later he had his favorite sons, Alexander and Aristobulus II, executed along with three hundred officials accused of siding with them. The list of close relatives and others murdered by Herod goes on and on; there seemed to be no limit to his cruelty or treachery.

Herod's own death was prolonged and painful. Toward the end he was nothing but a mass of rotting flesh; before he died, maggots fed on his vital organs. He was buried on the Herodium, a hill on which he had constructed a sumptuous mausoleum. Ironically, from this hill you can see the cave where, according to tradition, Jesus was born and in which the children slaughtered by Herod were buried.

Although he was about sixty-eight at the time, Herod was obsessed by the fear of a rival king. He may very well have sent spies to check the movements of the Magi and was quickly informed of their hasty departure. Bethlehem is only two hours from Jerusalem. When this power-mad maniac realized he had been cleverly duped, he flew into a rage and immediately ordered the death of every baby boy in Bethlehem and the surrounding area two years old or younger.

Relatively speaking, the slaughter of the Innocents of Bethlehem was one of Herod's lesser exploits. Scholars estimate the total number of victims as between twenty and thirty. But can you imagine the paralyzing hysteria that must have gripped Bethlehem on that terrifying day? The children were all under two, some just learning to walk,

others beginning to mouth gurgling sounds that proud fathers swore meant "daddy." Picture the pathos of a young father trudging home from his day's work in the fields only to find his wife holding their only son in her arms, warm blood still oozing from the wound in the heart of the child, his head lolling in the crook of his mother's arm. The mother sobbing, numb with grief. Then was fulfilled what was spoken through Jeremias the prophet saying,

A voice was heard in Rama,
 weeping and loud lamentation;
Rachel weeping for her children,
 and she would not be comforted,
 because they are no more.

Wasn't this all terribly cruel on God's part? The only crime these babies had committed was to be born about the same time and in the same place as the Christ Child. The slaughter of Bethlehem's baby boys is an especially grisly illustration of the problem of evil, a question that has vexed the minds of thinkers from St. Augustine to the present. Without going into the philosophy of the thing and the tolerating and permitting of evil by God, let us consider the Holy Innocents from the viewpoint of divine providence.

First of all, the children themselves were too young to realize what was happening; they had no foreknowledge of death and therefore endured no previous mental suffering. Their death was at least swift. Most important of all, they were baptized in the moment of death by a baptism of blood. They closed their eyes to their parents but opened them to God in all the splendor of His eternal glory. Mute martyrs, they were the very first to die for Christ and the only ones ever to die in place of Him.

If they had lived and grown up, who knows what might

have been? Would they have become poor drudges or shepherds like their fathers before them, or officials of the Roman occupation, mercenaries in Rome's army? Would they, perhaps, have been participants in the crime of the Crucifixion? We do not know. We do know they are saints in heaven today — and saints with a special prerogative, for they are said to have received from God the power to help us in the hour of death. The passage from the Apocalypse which is the Epistle for the Mass of the feast is applied to them. They are clad in white robes, in their hands they bear palms, and on their foreheads is written the name of God. They follow the Lamb wherever He goes, they form His permanent court. We cannot, then, accuse God of cruelty. On the surface the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents may be a somewhat grim illustration of divine providence, but looked at with the eyes of faith it becomes a striking example of God's mercy and generosity.

Providence has its application in our lives too. Sometimes we cannot fathom the occasional setbacks we are handed in life. We live so close to our immediate problems for so long at a stretch that it is easy to lose sight of the over-all picture. It is easy to forget that God is still running the show, pulling the essential strings offstage. We must try to look at everything through God's eyes. Try to take the long view and see the whole picture of life at once. There is so much more to life than this individual human being who happens to be existing at this given place at the present moment. Try to grow out of yourself, as it were, and be large-minded even when the manifold small pressures of daily living militate against it.

Concern with self must never become so excessive that we fail to appreciate the workings of God in our misfortunes.

The good things that happen to us are caused by God and He causes them to happen for a purpose. The unfortunate things that happen to us are at least permitted by God and they also are for a purpose. And sometimes God plans to accomplish more for us through misfortune than through the "nice" things that happen to us. When you get right down to it, it is a matter of having confidence in God, which is another way of saying we should practice the virtues of faith and hope. We must not be like Herod who left nothing to providence but murdered recklessly to achieve his ends. Rather let us imitate the Holy Innocents in their lack of resistance to God's plans and grace.

William Saroyan once wrote a play entitled *The Slaughter of the Innocents*. The setting of this play seems to be the United States after it had been taken over by a Communist regime, the modern counterpart of a Herodian government. In the name of the People's Republic, men and women are sentenced to the firing squad for petty offenses, citizens are executed in the name of the people, all to maintain the shaky supremacy of the dictator. Life is invested with an unreal, nightmarish quality to keep the masses psychologically inert. Saroyan's play may not be a portent but the point is this: each of us must make an effort to see our ordinary trials as details in God's great, life-size personal mosaic for us. Anyone who cannot succeed in doing that under ordinary circumstances certainly will not persevere in the face of a persecution that would come with Communism.

In yet another way, then, the Church insists that blood and sacrifice are inseparably connected with the birth of the Christ Child. In celebrating the Divine Office for the feast of the Holy Innocents, the Church chants this hymn at Lauds:

Hail, freshest buds of martyrdom,
Stripped off by Christ Child's foe
In briefest dawning of your sun,
As hurricane swirls new roses.

First sacrifice to Him who saves,
Dear tender victim lambs,
Childlike yet beyond your graves,
You sport with crown and palm.

To Jesus born of virgin,
To Father and Holy Ghost,
May glory be forever,
And through all eternity. Amen.



DECEMBER 29

RED ON WHITE

If Thomas Stearns Eliot had never written *Murder in the Cathedral*, St. Thomas à Becket would still have been the most famous saint in English literature. For it was to the shrine of this bishop-martyr that Chaucer and his pilgrims

were journeying in *The Canterbury Tales*. It must have been easy for Chaucer to feel the personal magnetism of this saint, since he had just died in the previous century. The date of his martyrdom: December 29, 1170.

St. Thomas à Becket began his rise to fame shortly after Henry II came to the throne of England in 1154. Thomas already was the trusted servant of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, and had recently been ordained a deacon by him and appointed Archdeacon of Canterbury. The King took Thomas, then thirty-six, for his chancellor, a position that made him the number-two man in England. King Henry was twelve years younger than Thomas, but they were excellent friends. People declared they had but one heart and one mind. They were united in more than their common interests of hunting and other pastimes, for each had the genuine prosperity of England at heart.

After Archbishop Theobald died in 1161, Henry Plantagenet wanted Thomas à Becket to become the next Archbishop of Canterbury. But already there had been rifts between King and Chancellor over the Church-State question and Thomas recoiled in horror from the proposed promotion. "I know your plans for the Church, you will assert claims which I, if I were archbishop, must needs oppose." The King got his way, however, and from this point on the story of St. Thomas à Becket unfolds with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy.

Even as chancellor, Thomas had practiced secret penances. Now he increased them and gave himself up to fasting, scourgings of the flesh, the hair shirt, protracted vigils, constant prayer. He went barefoot to receive the envoy who brought him the pallium from Rome.

Just as Thomas had feared, he and the King were almost

continually at odds. Matters came to a head with the question of clerics who had committed crimes against canon law. Thomas maintained the traditional position that clerics were to be tried in Church courts; Henry held that crimes against the common law were to be tried in secular courts. Thomas would not budge from his stand and was harried and persecuted by the King's agents. Once he was fined five hundred pounds and eventually was ordered to pay a sum of no less than thirty thousand pounds.

Fellow clerics begged him to give in. Thomas did not give in but escaped to sanctuary in France. The King then confiscated all his property and banished his kinfolk. He eventually forced Thomas to leave the Cistercian Abbey of Pontingny in Burgundy after threatening to wipe out all the Cistercian foundations in his domain.

Finally, after six years, some sort of reconciliation was effected while Henry was visiting in France. Thomas was apprehensive and at the end of the conference with the King said, "My Lord, my heart tells me that I part from you as one whom you shall see no more in this life." He subsequently wrote: "I go to England, whether to peace or to destruction I know not; but God has decreed what fate awaits me."

On December 1, 1170, Thomas à Becket came home and was wildly welcomed as a returning hero. At Canterbury the monks received him as an angel of God. Thomas only said, "I am come to die among you" and "In this church there are martyrs, and God will soon increase their number." His prophecy was accurate enough, he was dead within the month.

Before St. Thomas had come back to England, the King had had his son crowned by the Archbishop of York. This

was in direct violation of precedent (it was and is the prerogative of the Archbishop of Canterbury to crown the kings of England) and customary constitutional law. After Thomas returned, he published the Pope's letters suspending the bishops who had taken part in the coronation. The King demanded that the suspension be lifted and that the bishops be absolved immediately. Although Thomas himself had asked the Pope to soften the terms of suspension and knew that they would be softened, he said nothing and took a firm stand.

Henry, still in France, found out what was happening and flew into a rage. Just how far he is responsible for the death of St. Thomas is not certain but he is said to have uttered these fateful words: "What a pack of fools and cowards I have nourished in my house, that not one of them will avenge me of this turbulent priest." Four knights were in the group that heard the King's bitter speech. They took horse for the Channel, crossed it, and spurred to Canterbury. There they demanded that Thomas absolve the suspended bishops. When he refused they left and came back at Vespers with a band of armed men. Attendants tried to block their entrance but St. Thomas ordered them to be let in, asking only that his followers be spared as Christ Himself had asked at Gethsemani: "If it be I whom you seek, suffer these to go their way."

When the assailants called out, "Where is the traitor?" St. Thomas boldly replied: "Here I am, no traitor, but archbishop and priest of God." And later: "I am ready to die for God, and for the claims of justice, and for the liberty of the Church, if only she may gain peace and liberty by this shedding of my blood." The knights tried to drag him from the church but were unable to do so and finally

slew him where he stood, in his archbishop's robes, scattering his brains on the pavement.

The shock waves of Thomas' martyrdom were immediately felt throughout the whole of Christendom. It was still a feudal age and the principles and traditions of feudalism were the everyday truths that men lived by. To kill a king was sacrilege enough, for a king was "God's anointed." But to lay hands on pope or bishop was nothing short of monstrous.

King Henry himself was terrified. Although it is difficult to gauge the degree of his responsibility, there can be no doubt that he clearly foresaw the revulsion of public opinion that rose up against him as news of the murder spread. The King hurried messengers off to the Pope to disclaim responsibility and we are told that his penances were prodigious.

As miracles multiplied at the scene of the crime, the common people became more certain than ever that their martyr was a saint. Pope Alexander III confirmed their belief when he canonized St. Thomas à Becket on February 21, 1173, a little more than two years after his death. Before another year had passed, King Henry appeared at Canterbury and subjected himself to the humiliation of public penances.

Unlike St. Stephen and the Holy Innocents, St. Thomas did not die at the hands of non-Christians or by the instigation of a pagan king. He gave his life for the liberty of the Church and was slain in his own cathedral by fellow Catholics. The Church has seen his blood, crimson on white December snows, and has rewarded this faithful son by ranking him with the Christmas martyrs.



DECEMBER 31

ST. SYLVESTER, GUARDIAN OF CHRISTMAS

On the last day of the old year it would be very pleasant to single out Pope St. Sylvester I and hold him aloft as the symbol of the peace that should surround Christmas. It is true enough that during his lengthy pontificate of twenty-one

years Constantine, in conjunction with his coemperor Licinius, issued the famous Edict of Milan. After almost three centuries of persecution, Christianity for the first time was officially tolerated. It is also true that St. Sylvester was not martyred and possibly became the first pope in history out of approximately thirty-two predecessors who was not put to death for the Faith. Unfortunately, Pope Sylvester's reign was anything but peaceful.

First of all, we must not get too sentimental about Constantine. As the guardian angel of Christianity, he has been vastly overrated. Constantine was, first and last, an astute politician. He knew it was politically feasible to tolerate Christianity and thereby put a stop to the persecutions that were threatening to tear his empire to shreds.

Constantine's parents had been pagans but his father's religion was a form of the new moral monotheism popular in the Roman army. The symbol of this religion was the sun: *Sol Invictus*. Constantine had already arrived at the belief in one God when he had his famous vision. It was the night before the battle of Milvian Bridge, a mile or two outside Rome's Flaminian Gate. In a dream the Emperor was told to mark his soldiers' shields with the sign of the cross and go into battle with this as his emblem. He followed this advice and not only did he win the battle, but Maxentius, his opponent, was drowned in the Tiber as he fled from the field. Constantine entered Rome convinced that the one supreme God was the God of the Christians.

Shortly afterward, Constantine and Licinius published what has come to be called the Edict of Milan. At this time Constantine might be called an intellectual convert to Christianity, although his spiritual conversion was by no means complete. He did not become a catechumen until

late in life and was not baptized until he was on his death-bed, then only by an Arian bishop named Eusebius.

Although St. Sylvester was later to regret some of Constantine's misguided zeal as the self-appointed protector of the Church and mentor of faith and morals, the Pope was grateful for the Emperor's generosity. Thanks to him the construction of the great basilicas now began, for example, the Lateran, the Vatican Basilica, the Church of St. Agnes on the Via Nomentana, St. Paul Outside the Walls, and St. Lawrence. And everybody knows the story of Constantine's mother, St. Helena, her search for the True Cross and sponsorship of basilica building at the holy places in Palestine. The great churches we have in Rome today serve as ties to our spiritual inheritance and we are grateful to St. Sylvester for getting them started.

One of the most troublesome difficulties plaguing the reign of St. Sylvester was the Arian heresy. This heresy, which was named after Arius, attacked the divinity of Christ and thus attacked the very foundations of Christianity. Arius held that Christ was merely a creature, a created being, and that there was a time when He did not even exist. To settle this question, Constantine took it upon himself to summon a general council; it became the famous Council of Nicea. The Pope did not attend the Council himself but was represented by two Roman priests, Vitus and Vincentius. He later gave his approval to the Council which overwhelmingly condemned Arius.

The lessons for the feast in the second nocturn of the Breviary contain this interesting if inaccurate anecdote of how Constantine and Sylvester first met.

The Emperor, having been advised by his physicians to seek the cure of his leprosy by bathing in infants' blood,

was visited in his sleep by the holy Apostles Peter and Paul. They bade him refuse the sinful remedy of the bath if he desired to be cleansed from his leprosy and go to Sylvester, who was then hiding on Mount Soracte: that having been regenerated in the saving waters of baptism, he should give orders that Churches after the manner of the Christians should be built in every part of the Roman Empire; and that he should destroy the idols of the false gods and worship the true God. Constantine, therefore, obeying the heavenly admonition, caused the most diligent search to be made for Sylvester, and ordered him when found to be brought to him. This being done, and the pontiff having shown Constantine the portraits of the two Apostles he had seen in his sleep, the Emperor was baptized and healed, and became exceedingly zealous for the defense and propagation of the Christian religion.

This account does not square exactly with the historical version.

According to the same second nocturn lessons, St. Sylvester instituted several liturgical and disciplinary regulations that are still in force. Some examples:

That the Chrism should be blessed by a bishop only, that the priest should anoint the crown of the head of the person baptized; that deacons should wear dalmatics in the church, and a linen ornament on the left arm; that the Sacrifice of the Altar should not be celebrated excepting on a linen veil. He laid down the length of time during which they who received Orders should exercise the functions belonging to each Order before passing to a higher grade. He made it illegal for a layman to be the public accuser of a cleric, and forbade a cleric to plead before a civil tribunal.

St. Sylvester the Confessor is a type of those numerous saints who conquered the world for Christ without giving their lives in combat. The Church has chosen St. Sylvester to

grace the Christmas octave by representing this whole class of unmartyred heroes at the Christ Child's crib.

The last day of the year should be one of thanksgiving to God for all the good things He has given us during the year. The successor of St. Sylvester, our present Pope, gives us the example. On the last day of the year the Pope goes in state to the Gesu, the Jesus Church, and there assists at a solemn *Te Deum*. During this octave of Christmas and at year's end we would be ingrates indeed if we did not pause to thank God for His completely gratuitous assistance.



JANUARY 1

WHILE WE HAVE TIME

Although New Year's Day, the feast of the Circumcision, has the shortest Gospel of the year, there is strong probability that many have never really heard it. A lot of sleepy people just about get themselves standing up and it is over.

Here it is, the entire Gospel, one medium-size verse from St. Luke:

"After eight days were accomplished that the child should be circumcised, his name was called Jesus, which was called by the angel, before he was conceived in the womb."

At the time of Christ, the Jewish rite of circumcision, the baptism of the Old Testament, was one of the strictest prescriptions of the Law. The ceremony was performed early on the morning of the eighth day after birth. Although any Jewish male could administer it, it was usually performed by the child's father either in the home or in the synagogue. There were ten witnesses.

Two special chairs were provided, one for the godfather and one for the prophet Elias. In popular belief, this zealous champion of circumcision — and of the whole Mosaic Law — was invisibly present among the witnesses. The child was placed on Elias' chair for a moment to obtain the blessing of that great servant of God.

Our Redeemer's submission to the rite of circumcision is an outstanding example of obedience to law, even though He had come to abrogate this particular law and would eventually establish the New Law of Christianity in place of the Old Law. Christ honored and showed His respect for the Old Law by complying with it.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, the issue of circumcision stirred up considerable excitement and became the battle-ground of the conflict between the Old and the New. It would take the first Council of the young Church, the Apostles meeting under Peter in Jerusalem, to dispense officially with this regulation. Later St. Paul, the champion of the Gentiles, still circumcised Timothy for the sake of expediency, to avoid antagonizing the Jews unnecessarily.

Among present-day Christians, circumcision is still practiced by the Copts and Abyssinians. It is administered before Baptism and apparently has no religious significance. In our feast of the Circumcision, the rite itself is referred to only in the Gospel, the remainder of the Mass and Office being a continuation of Christmas.

The Circumcision of Christ, like the Magi's star we shall see at Epiphany, is part of the rich symbolism that plays so large a part in His life. In this feast which commemorates the first shedding of the infant Saviour's blood, we have another anticipation of His final sacrifice. Moreover, it was at His circumcision that Jesus was given the name of Jesus, which literally means *saviour*.

The Church has seen fit to celebrate this feast at the beginning of the New Year. Celebrating New Year's is pretty much of a universal custom. In some pagan cultures the tradition is quite ancient and carries religious overtones. For the Japanese, the year-end celebration has deep cultural roots and religious implications. New Year's is the greatest festival of the year because it gives the people new life, hopes, and dreams. The Japanese people think of each year as a separate entity, having its own particular fortune. The past year ends with all its troubles on New Year's Eve and everything starts fresh on the first day of the new year. In Japan, the New Year's celebration goes on for a full month.

In our more "advanced" occidental cultures, some of the parties staged to commemorate the demise of the old year and the birth of the new get pretty big. They run to outside dimensions, sprawl out, and develop vast and unhappy proportions. The words of St. Paul to Titus which appear in the Epistle of today's Mass seem aimed directly at those

for whom New Year's is nothing but alcohol and amnesia. St. Paul writes to Titus (and to us) this friendly note:

Nicopolis, Greece
Sometime in A.D. 66

Dearly Beloved,

The grace of God our Saviour hath appeared to all men, instructing us, that, denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live soberly, and justly, and godly in this world, looking for the blessed hope and coming of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity.

Sincerely,

Paul of Tarsus, Apostle

Granted that in our world of modern paganism the mood of New Year's offers abundant opportunity for high-priced debauchery, and granted that a certain amount of wholesome rejoicing is not only tolerated but laudable if done as legitimate recreation, New Year's should suggest an opportunity for a spiritual inventory. On the first day of the new year we need to be reminded again to get busy and start in anew on the frightfully serious business of saving our souls.

For example, we might just remind ourselves of the value of time for eternity and what a crime it is against ourselves to waste time. Here is Cardinal Manning on that subject: "God so values time that He gives it to us only day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. And He never gives us one moment without taking the last away. We never have two moments at once."

Shakespeare in *Richard II* has his hero deliver a moving soliloquy about the inaudible and restless foot of time. Richard, the actor-king, has been deposed by his rival

Bolingbroke and is chafing in the dungeon of Pomfret Castle:

How sour sweet music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To check time broke in a disorder'd string;
But, for the concord of my state and time,
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
I wasted time, and now doth time waste me (V, 5).

At the end of the Franciscan Rule comes an exhortation in the words of St. Paul to the Galatians: "Brethren, while we have time, let us do good." It would be difficult to think of a better or more inclusive New Year's resolution.

PART FOUR: LITTLE CHRISTMAS



SUNDAY BEFORE EPIPHANY

IN THE NAME OF JESUS

Sometimes when a new baby comes along the parents are in quite a dither about what to name the child. The story is told of two Irish biddies who met a young mother on the street wheeling a baby carriage. One of the venerable

ladies asked the name of the child. "Hazel," the young lady replied. The older women received the information with a kind of amazed silence. After the mother had gone, one of them turned to the other and said, "With all the holy saints' names there are, she had to go and name the child after a nut."

Well, you know how it is trying to select a name for a baby. If you don't use the name of one of the parents, you have to be pretty careful which side of the family you favor. If you name a boy after the father's Uncle Adelbert, the mother's Uncle Boris is mortally offended. If you name a girl after the mother's Aunt Abigail, Aunt Olga will be seeing the world through green-colored glasses.

The Blessed Mother and St. Joseph had none of these problems. There never was any doubt about what Mary's Son was to be called. His name had been dictated by the archangel Gabriel when he announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of the Redeemer. "And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus." St. Joseph also was notified in advance. "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins." Our Lord certainly deserves the title *Saviour* because He did save us from the worst part of original sin and regained for us the right to enter heaven.

Our Lord's other name, *Christ*, comes from a Greek word that literally means *the anointed one*. The Old Testament gave that title to kings, priests, and prophets because all were consecrated by a symbolic anointing. The title of *the anointed one* belongs to Jesus in a special way because He united the offices of king, priest, and prophet in His one divine person. He was and is our eternal High Priest,

He is King and Lord of all creation, He is the greatest of all the prophets. Moreover, in the case of Jesus, the process was reversed because in Him human nature received a perfect anointing through its contact with divinity.

The feast of the Most Holy Name of Jesus is a comparatively new feast. It was put into the Church calendar in 1913. It is always celebrated on the Sunday falling between the feast of the Circumcision and Epiphany.

The name of Jesus is a holy name. It is a name of honor: "God also has exalted him and has bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, so that in the name of Jesus every knee should bend of those in heaven, on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father." It is a name of salvation: "Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." It is a name of power: "Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father anything in my name, he will give it to you."

The Church has officially encouraged devotion to the Holy Name since the thirteenth century. In 1274 the Council of Lyons prescribed that the faithful should cultivate this devotion in reparation for the insults of the Albigensian heretics and other blasphemers. The Dominicans were the first to take up the devotion and propagate it in a serious way. Andrea Diaz, a retired Dominican bishop, preached a kind of novena in honor of the Holy Name in Lisbon in 1432. This extended prayer in honor of the Holy Name is credited with stopping a plague then ravaging the city. In gratitude, the people held what was probably the first Holy Name procession in history on January 1, 1433.

Although the Dominicans began the work of promoting

devotion to the Holy Name, it was two Franciscans, St. Bernardine of Siena and St. John Capistrano, who were most successful. Everywhere they went throughout Italy they carried a copy of the monogram (IHS) of the Holy Name (incidentally, the letters IHS are derived from the first three letters of the Greek word for Jesus). At the close of their sermons, these two Franciscans exhibited the emblem of the Holy Name and asked the people to prostrate themselves to adore the Redeemer. They recommended placing the monogram on the gates of cities and above the doors of houses.

Because the manner in which St. Bernardine preached this devotion was new he was accused by his enemies and brought before the tribunal of Pope Martin V. St. John Capistrano defended his master so well that the Pope not only permitted homage to the Holy Name but even assisted at a procession in which the monogram was carried. The tablet used by St. Bernardine can be seen today at Santa Maria in Ara Caeli, Rome.

With all this in mind, we certainly should be very careful how we use the name of our Redeemer. How ironic that the sacramental name of Jesus, our Saviour and Redeemer, the God-Man who loved us enough to die for us, is often used in anger and to express all the ugliest feelings that man is capable of. Surely, this abuse must have first been an invention of the devil himself. How solicitous we should be to use this name of names only in prayer or in serious discussion. If we think about it at all, we will realize that taking God's name in vain is totally unnecessary because there are so many harmless and indifferent exclamations we can substitute for the Holy Name if we merely want to blow off steam.

Here we can take a leaf from the life of St. Francis of Assisi. It is said that he had great devotion to the name of God and whenever he went walking he would pick up every scrap of paper that happened in his way. He did this just on the chance that the name of God might be written on it and he did not want God's name to be trampled underfoot even accidentally.



JANUARY 6

PRESENTING THE CHRIST

Marco Polo, locked up in prison in Genoa, dictated his memoirs to fellow prisoner "master Rustigielo, a citizen of Pisa," in 1295. Buried deep in his travel adventures is this passage:

Persia was anciently a large and noble province, but it is now a great part destroyed by the Tartars. In Persia there is a city which is called Saba, from whence were the three magi who came to adore Christ in Bethlehem; and the three are buried in that city in a fair sepulchre, and they are all three entire with their beards and hair. One was called Baldasar, the second Gaspar, and the third Melchior. Marco inquired often in that city concerning the three magi, and nobody could tell him anything about them, except that the three magi were buried there in ancient times. After three days' journey you come to a castle which is called Palasata, which means the castle of the fire-worshippers. . . . The men of that castle say, that anciently three kings of that country went to adore a certain king who was newly born, and carried with them three offerings, namely, gold, frankincense, and myrrh: gold, that they might know if he were an earthly king; frankincense, that they might know if he were God; and myrrh, that they might know if he were a mortal man. When these magi were presented to Christ, the youngest of the three adored him first, and it appeared to him that Christ was of his stature and age. The middle one came next, and then the eldest, and to each he seemed to be of their own stature and age. Having compared their observations together, they agreed to go all to worship at once, and then he appeared to them all of his true age.*

The feast of the Epiphany is actually more ancient than the feast of Christmas and in a few countries is still celebrated as "Little Christmas." In Spain, gifts are exchanged on Epiphany rather than on Christmas Day. For us in the West, Epiphany is essentially the feast of the Three Kings, the day set aside for commemorating Christ's manifestation of Himself to the Gentiles. At Bethlehem, Christ was manifested exclusively to the Jews; it was only after the

* *The Travels of Marco Polo*, The Orion Press, N. Y., distributed by Crown Publishers, Inc., p. 33.

arrival of the Magi that His existence became known to the non-Jewish world.

Epiphany celebrates a triple manifestation of the divinity of our Redeemer: to the Magi at Bethlehem, to the world at His baptism by St. John, and again to the world — but in a somewhat different way — at the marriage feast of Cana. The *Magnificat* antiphon for Second Vespers of this feast is: “We keep our holy day adorned with three miracles: today a star led the magi to the crib, today wine was made from water at the marriage, today in the Jordan Christ willed to be baptized by John to save us.”

So far as the three kings are concerned, it is difficult to sift fact from fiction. First of all, there is no real evidence that they were kings. The Magi as a class were disciples of Zoroaster. Although the wise men probably did study the movements of the stars as all learned men did then, they were not astrologers or sorcerers. The star that guided them may not have been a star at all as we understand it, but it does seem to have been some kind of miraculous apparition because it stopped when they stopped, moved ahead when they moved, and remained fixed over their goal. Such heavenly guides were not unknown in the Old Testament. God led the chosen people through the desert with a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. When Jesus was crucified, disturbances in nature and among the heavenly bodies again showed forth God’s power.

None of the evangelists says there were three Magi and popular tradition has had as few as two and as many as twelve, but three has always been a heavy favorite. Around the ninth century, this same popular tradition assigned the wise men names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

By the time the Magi got to Bethlehem, the Christ Child

was most probably at least a year old and Mary and Joseph had long since moved out of the Nativity cave and into a house. The gifts the Magi brought with them were exactly the ones required for royalty by oriental etiquette and each gift had a mystical symbolism. Gold signified that the Christ Child was a king, the frankincense was a sign of His priesthood, and the myrrh foreshadowed His death and burial. Practically speaking, the gold probably came in very handy and although the Blessed Mother would have wanted to put it away for a souvenir it may well have been used to pay the rent or the grocery bill.

Thirty years later, when Christ cured the centurion's servant, He would say: "I tell you that many will come from the east and the west, and will feast with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the children of the kingdom will be put forth into the darkness outside; there will be the weeping and gnashing of teeth." The Magi, Gentiles themselves and our representatives, had already underscored the truth of that prophecy.

Although the Magi came from the East as Marco Polo reported, the Eastern Church overlooks the Magi on Epiphany and emphasizes the second manifestation of Christ's divinity: His baptism by John in the Jordan. In the West, we now have a special feast in honor of Christ's baptism on the octave of Epiphany. So we will go on to the marriage of Cana, where the third manifestation of divinity took place when Christ began His public career by performing His first recorded miracle.

St. John the Evangelist tells us that Mary attended the Cana wedding, and it seems she arrived some time before her Son. Perhaps she was a friend or relative of the bride and had made the short trip from Nazareth to Cana a few days

in advance to help the women with the preparations for the wedding. This was to be an occasion of double rejoicing for Mary; there was the wedding, of course, but she would also be seeing her Son again for the first time in two months.

The weddings of poor Jewish country people in those days were the biggest things in their lives. These poor peasants went along through the year with little in the way of entertainment or recreation. When a wedding feast was held in the neighborhood it was a time for universal merriment. Sometimes the party went on for several days. You can imagine the consternation of the women serving the dinner when the word went round that the wine was running out. It would be a terrible disgrace for the family of the groom at whose home the celebration was being held. There would be bitter complaints and jibes from the unsophisticated guests who had frankly been looking forward to this feast for a long time. Now the festivities would end abruptly and the party would fizzle out.

Mary was aware of what was happening and said quietly to her Son: "They have no wine." The simplicity of her remark is indicative of the perfect harmony that existed between this mother and her Son. She did not beg Him for a miracle, she did not insist, she did not command. She simply reported the situation as it existed and trusted with a mother's supreme confidence that her Son would take care of everything. And, of course, He did.

Do not be misled by our Lord's answer to His mother. He said: "What wouldst thou have me to do, woman? My hour has not yet come." First of all, the word *woman* is not a good translation; it does not sound that harsh in the original Aramaic that Christ spoke. Perhaps *lady* would be a better word for modern ears. "What wouldst thou have

me do" is an idiom that can mean many things depending on circumstances and how it is said. No doubt our Lord meant it respectfully, perhaps even playfully. We might render it in modern American idiom by "So what am I supposed to do about it?"

The Blessed Mother was not going to be impressed by *her* Son putting on playful airs and she was not the least concerned with *how* He would solve this domestic catastrophe but she knew He would. She simply said to the servants: "Just do as he tells you." Exercising our imaginations a bit we can picture Jesus leaning back and sighing with mock despair, "Mothers . . . what are you going to do with them?" And then He proceeded to perform His first miracle on this earth.

The six large stone water jars referred to in St. John's Gospel were used for purification of utensils for the feast and for the convenience of the guests. All together they held about 150 gallons of water. If all that water was changed into wine it would have been quite a supply. It is possible that it all was changed but you can also read the text to mean that only one draft, the last one taken from the well, was changed. For only after the sixth jar was filled did Jesus say: "Draw out now and take to the chief steward."

It is just possible that Jesus felt some personal responsibility for the wine shortage. After all, He had shown up with four uninvited guests, His first four disciples — Andrew, Peter, John, and Philip — all fishermen. Fishermen are supposed to have a creditable thirst and sometimes take their drinking quite seriously. Did these four extra guests put an unexpected dent in the wine stores?

Seriously, what is the meaning of Cana? Now that we have gone over the ground and cleared away some diffi-

culties, you may wonder if this pleasant story has any special significance. It does. First, Jesus would have dignified the wedding feast of Cana even if He had merely consented to be present at it. He went further than that, however; He stamped the seal of divine approval on the institution of marriage and signed it with His own holiness by working His first miracle at a wedding. It was probably at the marriage feast of Cana that matrimony was raised to the dignity of a sacrament.

Second, we are here given a splendid proof of Christ's love for His mother. Perhaps He changed His schedule and began His public life earlier for her sake. Third, St. John tells us at the end of his account: "This first of his signs Jesus worked in Cana of Galilee; and he manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him." So Cana was also for the benefit of the freshmen Apostles, to confirm their faith in the new-found Messias.

Finally, the story of Cana needs to be told at Christmas time, the feast of the Incarnation, because it serves to develop and bring out the humanity of Jesus, it makes Him appear more credible, more a real flesh-and-blood human being. Cana gives Christ the man a certain immediacy which perhaps eludes us when we look at the miraculously born Child surrounded by angels.



SUNDAY WITHIN THE OCTAVE
OF EPIPHANY

THE HUMAN TRINITY

Joseph and Mary and the Child Jesus had been living in Egypt only a few months when Herod died. Before long, an angel appeared to the head of the Holy Family, St.

Joseph, and reported this latest intelligence. It was time to go home. Without any hemming and hawing or seeking after additional details, Joseph and Mary quietly packed up and started off. They had no sooner arrived in Judea than a new problem presented itself in the person of Archelaus.

Herod's kingdom had been split up among his sons: Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. Archelaus was to inherit the throne of Judea and therefore control of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. He already had a reputation for diabolical wickedness. The Jews sent a fifty-man delegation to Rome to plead with Caesar Augustus to break up the Herodian dynasty. They had no success. However, Archelaus' reign was short-lived. He was so cruel and tyrannical that the Jews combined with their old enemies, the Samaritans, and sent off a fresh delegation in A.D. 6. This time Augustus summoned Archelaus to Rome and speedily banished him to Vienne in Gaul.

When the Holy Family arrived in Judea, however, Archelaus was apparently still in power and St. Joseph, as guardian of Jesus and Mary, was afraid to settle in his territory. Once again his confidence in God was rewarded by the now familiar visit of the angel. "Being warned in a dream, he withdrew into the region of Galilee."

Now begins the cloister of Christ's hidden life. All we really know about the next eleven years is packed into a single verse from St. Luke: "And the child grew and became strong. He was full of wisdom and the grace of God was upon him." Although we have no facts, it is easy to picture Mary stealing occasional glances at her mysteriously wonderful Boy and wondering with a mother's tender sadness about the prophetic visit of the Magi and the soul-

searing prophecy of old Simeon. Her intuitions proved to be correct for the next time Christ appears in the Gospel, now a boy of twelve, we see her heart wrung anew.

Every Jewish male thirteen years of age or older was obliged to visit the Temple in Jerusalem three times a year on the big feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Women and children frequently accompanied the men of the family. If they came from a distance such as Galilee they traveled in a caravan. Once a caravan got started for the day it usually splintered up into small groups and anyone could float from one group to another as the spirit moved him. At the evening stopover, everybody got back together again. It was all very free and easy and a holiday mood prevailed.

We must not suspect Mary or Joseph of the least neglect of duty when Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem. They had every reason to assume He was visiting with friends or neighbors along the way as He no doubt had done on the way down from Nazareth and perhaps even many times before on previous trips. It was at the end of the first day's travel that the disappearance of Jesus was discovered.

In our own day we hear enough about kidnaped and missing children to appreciate the panic that grips with steel fingers the hearts of mothers or fathers who have lost a child. Imagine, then, how Mary and Joseph must have felt when the slow-dawning truth burst full upon them: Their personal charge, their exclusive responsibility, the Boy Messias had vanished!

It took almost a full day to retrace the route to Jerusalem and another doubt and fear-filled twenty-four hours of buffeting holiday crowds before Jesus could be found. The rest of the story we know. Jesus was in the Temple and had

been engaged in a discussion with the teachers and doctors.

And all who were listening to him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold, thy father and I have been seeking thee sorrowing." And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" And they did not understand the word that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them; and his mother kept all these things carefully in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before God and men.

When Jesus left Jerusalem to go back to Nazareth and be subject to His parents, He began the second phase of His hidden life. He lived in complete obscurity, an unknown, and was subject in humility and obedience to His earthly mother and father. The incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, the Messias, who later on would dazzle the public with miracles, this God of all mankind hid Himself away in a small town and performed the dull tasks of a carpenter's helper. Later, after Joseph died, Jesus supported His mother by the work of His hands. In fact, when He afterward came back to His home town and spoke in the local synagogue, neighbors and relatives who had known Him almost since birth and had watched Him grow up, referred to Him by His trade: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary . . . ?"

The feast of the Holy Family is celebrated every year at Christmas time on the Sunday within the octave of the Epiphany. The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph serves in many ways as the model for the family virtues. One virtue of the Holy Family that modern families might well emulate is humility. Humility can do much to smooth out

the petty frictions and molehill mountains that inevitably rise to the surface when human beings live close together for long periods of time. The young Creator, the God who shaped the cosmos with one effortless volition, now bends to learn the carpenter's skill from a human foster father and struggles with crude tools to shape stubborn lumber into a useful bit of furniture.

This resplendent example of divine humility should be enough to inspire, for instance, the unsung housewife who goes along for years doing the menial, humdrum jobs without any particular recognition or praise. There may be no glamour in this kind of existence, but it already shines with the far brighter brilliance of paradise. If you are not hounded by the demands of public life, if you are not in the lime-light, if you are not soiled with the dust and smut of the world, it is much easier to give yourself to God, to dedicate yourself entirely to the one single purpose of life, saving your immortal soul.

How much harder it must be for the wealthy businessman, the big movie star, the socialite, the politician, for anyone who wastes so much time chasing after money or fame or power. The peace and tranquillity that goes with the hidden life is a valuable possession, certainly much more to be prized than the glamour and glitter and noise of the world. If you ever have any doubts about this, remember that when God became man He could have had His pick of any type of life at all. Christ could have been a rich merchant, an idol of the Roman circus, the admired leader of Roman high society, Caesar himself. Christ had His choice. He chose to be a workingman.

Another virtue perfectly mirrored in the Holy Family is obedience, the virtue that inclines us to submit our will

to that of our lawful superiors insofar as they are the representatives of God. The most important words of that definition are the last ones. When we obey a superior — whether it be husband, mother or father, a policeman on the corner, the president of the United States, our pastor or bishop — we are obeying God at least indirectly.

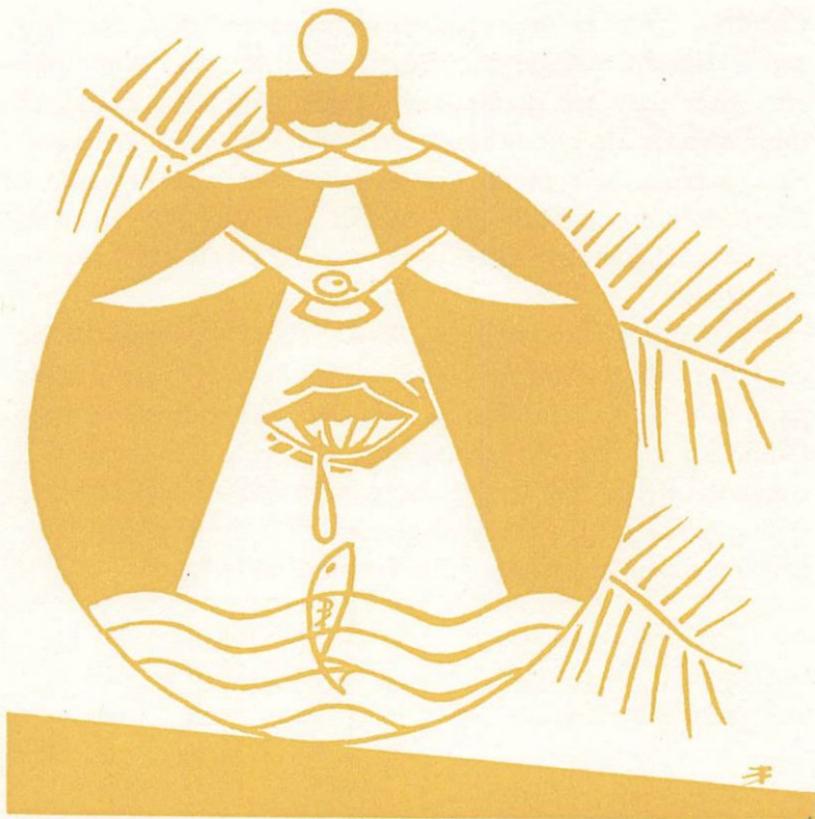
It is difficult for us to grasp the concept of obedience because we have been educated in a tradition that glorifies independence. What we are talking about here, however, is a question of order. In nature we find a God-instituted order: on the lowest rung of the ladder of creation are minerals, then plants, animals, men, and finally angels. The higher creatures use the lower ones to their own advantage and to achieve their ends. Thus plants, which utilize minerals, are in turn eaten by animals, and animals are used by men. This is God's plan and it is His will that inferiors be subject to superiors. It is also God's plan to manifest His will to us through our fellow men. And that's where the rub comes in. We would be delighted and privileged to obey God if He came down on earth and delivered His orders to us in person, but that is not God's way and we should try to see in our superiors the envoys of God.

We pay a good deal of attention to obedience because it is the rock-bottom foundation of family life. Children must be obedient to their parents and — despite feminist propaganda and modern heresies — wives must be obedient to their husbands as head of the family. This is not to say that husbands are free to act as tyrants. They must carry their authority lightly and rule with justice and kindness. They should take St. Joseph as their ideal of the model father.

Mary, of course, is *par excellence* the model mother.

Children have as their pattern none other than the Boy Jesus Himself. Although children need not obey their parents after they are themselves married and have homes of their own or after they reach their majority, they are never exempt from the command to love and respect their parents. Even after our parents die, we still have the obligation to pray for them that they may not be detained long in purgatory.

The supreme lesson of the Holy Family is this: If the God-Man, Jesus Christ, could subject Himself to earthly parents, if God could obey us, His creatures, cannot we obey God? He has clearly spelled out His will for us in His commandments and in the commandments of His Church. The practice of the virtue of obedience is the first and most necessary step in making your family a holy family.



THE OCTAVE OF EPIPHANY

EPILOGUE

When the liturgy was revised a few years ago, a new feast came into existence. For centuries the theme of the Mass and Office for the octave of Epiphany had been the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. Now, for the first time, the

baptism of our Lord was commemorated as a special feast.

One tradition places the site of the Saviour's baptism on the western bank of the Jordan about four miles north of the Dead Sea. When Jesus arrived there from Galilee to be baptized by John, His precursor wanted no part of it. He objected: "It is I who ought to be baptized by thee, and dost thou come to me?" But the divine plan prevailed and Jesus was baptized, probably by immersion. "And behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and coming upon him. And behold, a voice from the heavens said, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' "

Here is just about as clear a declaration of divinity as one could imagine: God the Father speaking from heaven and appealing to our sense of hearing, the Holy Ghost appearing simultaneously in the form of a dove.

It was probably at this time that Jesus instituted the sacrament of Baptism. In His own baptism, the water did not sanctify Jesus but rather He sanctified it, making it the cleansing element of our sacrament by contact with His sacred body. In ancient times, Epiphany was the official day for administering Baptism in the Eastern Church. Although the Roman Church as early as Pope Leo I decreed Easter and Pentecost as the only two feasts set aside for the solemn administration of Baptism, the custom of blessing baptismal water with solemnity on the feast of the Epiphany remains and is still observed in some parts of the West.

After He was baptized our Lord went into the desert and began the forty-day fast at the end of which He entered upon His public career. Although Epiphany and its octave are essentially an extension of the joyous theme of Christmas, it too is tinged with a measure of sorrow because it

introduces Christ's public ministry which can end only with the rush and thrust of Good Friday. The happy days of Bethlehem and Nazareth are forever past; St. Joseph, the loving and patient protector, has already died and Jesus must begin the work for which He came into the world.

With the octave of Epiphany the Christmas liturgy comes to a close. Advent prepares us for the birth of the Saviour and builds toward the climax of His actual appearance in Bethlehem. On Christmas Day we are blessed with a triple privilege for on this day every priest is permitted to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass three times. After Christmas the Church presents the highlights of our Redeemer's early years and concludes the Christmas cycle at the beginning of His public life.

All of this is summed up for us symbolically in the person of John the Baptist. He is the living embodiment of the authentic spirit of Christmas. His whole life was centered around Christ. He was literally born for the Redeemer, spent the greater part of his life in solitude and penance preparing for his mission of announcing the Messias. At the end he died by the hand of Christ's own enemies for daring to speak the truth about a sinful king.

With the beginning of Advent, John the Baptist appears again on the scene, announcing his age-old message of repentance and challenging us to prepare ourselves for the tremendous feast of the Incarnation. During the octave of Christmas he crops up in the life of St. John the Evangelist as the man responsible for his vocation to Christ's priesthood. Now, at the close of the Christmas season, he is on hand once more, his work nearly finished, administering baptism to Jesus at the beginning of His public life before going off to prison and martyrdom. If we happened to be

casting around for a patron saint of Christmas, someone to stand with St. Francis of Assisi, we could do worse than choose St. John the Baptist.